DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 363 SO 019 686

AUTHOR Douglas, Bob; And Others
TITLE Discovering the Local Landscape: Pioneer Log Buildings.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 54p.; Photographs may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Construction (Process); Cultural Exchange; *Cultural Influences; Land Settlement; *Structural Elements (Construction); United States History
IDENTIFIERS Germans; *Log Buildings; *Minnesota (Saint Peter); Pioneer Life; Scandinavians; United States (East)

ABSTRACT

Building structures made from logs appeared in the eastern United States during the late 17th century, and immigrants from Sweden, Finland, and Germany are credited with their construction. There were two types of structures: the horizontal design introduced by the Scandinavians and the German or Pennsylvania Dutch model that was used by the westward pioneers. Since the principal construction material was logs, these structures ceased to be built after westward-moving pioneers reached the prairie regions. The most distinctive feature of a log building was its corner-timbering or notching, and the full and half dovetail, square, saddle or round, and the V-notch are described and accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations. The concluding portion of the document contains black and white photographs and the specifications for 20 log structures located around St. Peter, Minnesota. A map showing this area and the 20 building locations and a map of the distribution of log buildings in the eastern United States are provided. Eleven references are also included. (DJC)

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DISCOVERING THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE:

PIONEER LOG BUILDINGS

by

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I INTRODUCTION

This is a monograph about some of the log buildings constructed by early settlers in the St.Peter, Minnesota area. We became interested in this subject for a number of reasons. Our first objective was to refine a map of the distribution of log construction in the eastern half of the United States produced by Professor Terry Jordan (see Fig. 1,p.4). On this map, much of the western half of Minnesota including our home area of St.Peter in the south-central part of the state is shown as devoid of log buildings.We knew,in fact, that this was not the case and began a search for as many remaining pioneer log buildings as time permitted.

Secondly, our research made us aware that early log buildings in other regions of the country were far from homogeneous in form. Rather, upon closer inspection, these buildings exhibited variation in size,style of corner notching, and shape of logs. It became an interesting part of our search to determine if such a rich variety in style existed in our area. Indeed, that is what we found - hewn and round logs, full dovetails and half dovetails, saddle and square notches. Apparently, the diversity in log construction mirrored the diversity of the settlers who built them. We have systematically recorded this diversity by measuring and photographing these buildings.

Thirdly, we found that it is possible to see a log building as something more than an interesting physical object. Depending on the observer, they can be beautiful or ugly, proud or humble,crude or craftsman-like in appearance. In short, they express something. Certainly one of these things is longevity. The original ones - not the restored ones - have outlived their occupants.They were built to last so that we see them now as antiques

on the landscape,relics of a past time. Perhaps, this is the most appealing thing about studying them.They are so out of place. They're not in keeping with the present scene, and as such not only remind us of the past but enable us to see a portion of it.

What we have seen and learned about pioneer log buildings has been organized in the following way. Chapter II deals briefly with the origin, diffusion, and demise of the log building on the American frontier. Chapter III illustrates and describes various methods of construction used by the early settlers in building their log cabins, barns, and churches. Chapter IV is a written and photographic inventory of the log buildings we have studied in the St.Peter area. Lastly, in Chapter V, we have concluded with our feelings on the need to preserve these buildings.

II ORIGIN, DIFFUSION, AND DEMISE OF PIONEER LOG BUILDINGS IN THE UNITED STATES

Two generalizations can be made about the origin and diffusion of the log building in the United States: (1) that it was introduced by a group of immigrants from Scandinavia and (2) that it developed into the accepted building form on the frontier for much of the eastern part of the country.

ORIGIN

The log structure was introduced into the American colonies by immigrants from Scandinavia.[1] The place of origin or hearth (see Fig. 1) was a small Swedish - Finnish settlement known as New Sweden, founded in 1638 in what is now the state of Delaware.[2]

[1] Shurtleff, Harold R. The Log Cabin Myth, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1939, p. 3.

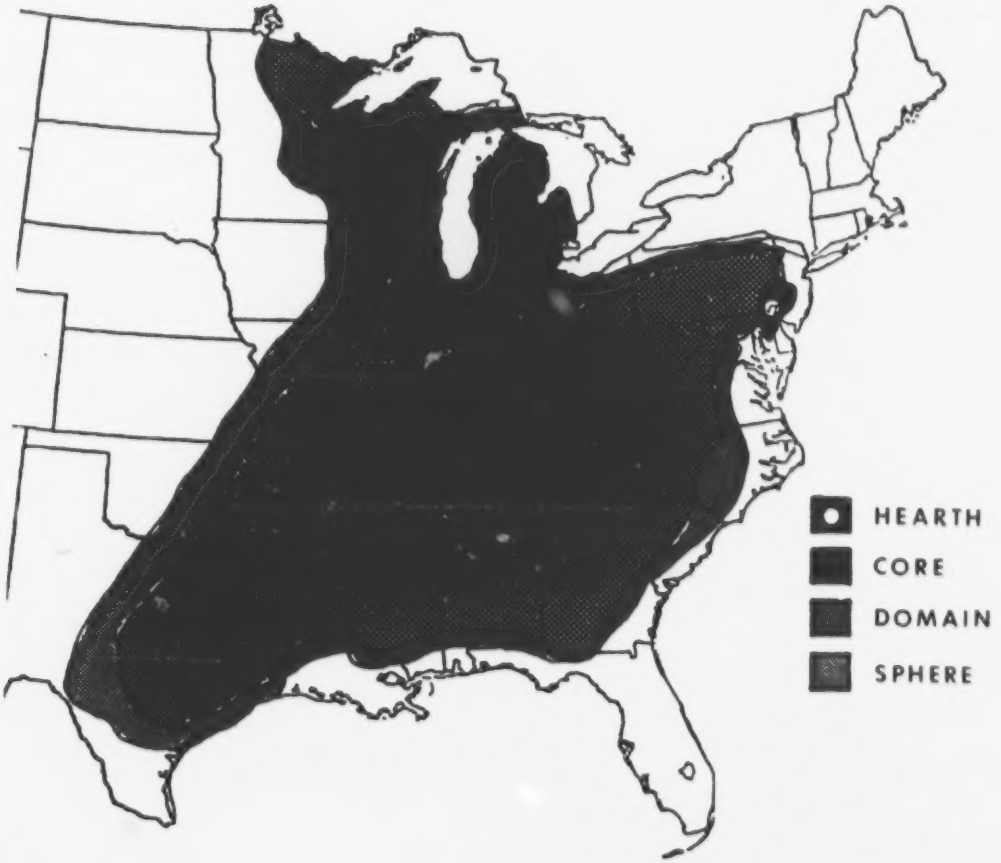
[2] Mercer, Henry C."The Origin of Loghouses in the United States", Old Time New England, Vol.18, No. 1,p. 4.

The basic design was simple - logs laid on top of each other with the cracks chinked or filled in with sticks and mud or mortar. This horizontal log structure is to be distinquished from the vertical log building which was introduced onto the continent by Spain in St.Augustine,Florida as early as 1597.[3]

The horizontal log building should not be considered solely an innovation of the Swedish and Finnish immigrants, but rather a reflection of their north European ancestry. Historical writings point to the fact that not only the Swedes and Finns but the Russians, French, Swiss and even some Asian cultures knew of, and used, similar log construction techniques as far back as the

[3] Ibid.,p.8.

DISTRIBUTION OF LOG BUILDINGS IN THE EASTERN U.S.



AFTER: JORDAN, TEXAS LOG BUILDINGS, P. 26.

RBD

FIG. 1

Middle Ages.[4] The Scandinavians, therefore, served as the carriers of a building method that was already in use in much of northern Europe.

DIFFUSION

Despite the fact that the Swedes and Finns were the first to introduce what was believed to be a structure "greatly superior to the rougher sort of English framed and clapboard dwellings"[5], their log building apparently remained concentrated in a small area around Delaware Bay. This was not the case with the German or "Pennsylvania Dutch" log structure. It was introduced into southeastern Pennsylvania about 1710.[6] Though it lacked the fine detail of the Swedish - Finnish log building, it did give a model to later settlers which was less difficult to construct.[7]

The Germans, then, and not the Scandinavians are credited with beginning the diffusion of the log building from their core area of southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and northern Maryland (see Fig. 1). From this core, the model moved into the "interior counties of Pennsylvania; and it was certainly they who carried the type into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia".[8] Other immigrant groups, such as the Scotch - Irish, adopted the same form of housing as soon as they came into the country. According to Jordan, logs were the dominant type of pioneer building material

4 Ibid., p.3.

5 The Log Cabin Myth, p. 63.

6 Ibid., p. 175.

7 Weslager, C.A." Log Structures in New Sweden During the Seventeenth Century," Delaware History, September, 1952, p.78.

8 The Log Cabin Myth, p. 176.

in the area shaded domain on the map and of lesser importance in the area shaded sphere (see Fig. 1).[9]

DEMISE

With time other methods of construction came into vogue and replaced logs as building material. The western boundary on the map represents, according to Jordan, the approximate line where log construction ceased. In addition, it marks a change in native or original vegetation. East of this line the pre-settlement landscape was primarily wooded. In eastern Minnesota this area was called the "Big Woods" by the early pioneers. It consisted of oaks (Bur,White,Red, and Black), Elms, Basswood, Ash, Maple, Hornbeam,Aspen,Birch, Wild Cherry, Hickory, Butternut,Black Walnut with some White Pine.[10] These trees were plentiful and, thus, afforded a natural resource for log construction.

West of this line the lanscape was primarily prairie. Sod houses replaced log houses. Native wood was hard to come by. Thus, an environmental boundary, the change from woodland to prairie, plus the development of other building materials, led to the demise of the pioneer log building.

[9] Jordan, Terry G. Texas Log Buildings: A Folk Architecture, Univ.of Texas Press,Austin,1978,p. 26.

[10] Marschner,Francis J."Map of theOriginal Vegetation of Minnesota",Forest Service, U.S.Dept. of Agriculture, St.Paul,Minnesota, 1974.

III LOG BUILDING CONSTRUCTION

A. Corner Notching

The most distinctive feature of a log building is its style of corner-timbering or notching. Consequently, log buildings have been classified according to the method by which the corners are joined. There are four principal types: dovetail (both full and half), square, saddle or round and V - notch.

1a. Full Dovetail

The full dovetail is an impressive piece of workmanship. The tongue or end of the log is cut in two different directions on both its top and bottom sides (see Fig.2). Hence, its dovetail appearance. With one cut slanted toward the outside of the corner, any water which might seep into the joint is drained away. Although difficult to construct, it is the strongest and most durable of the notches, resulting in corners which have held together for a hundred years or more.

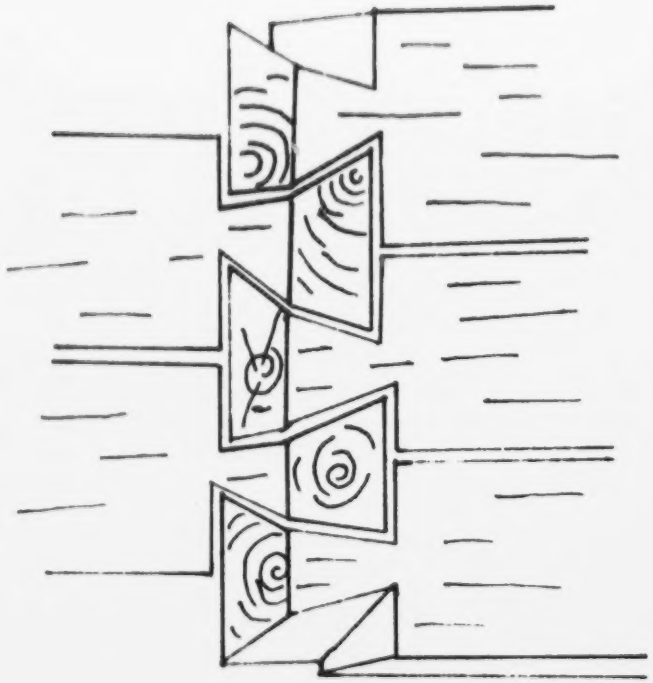


Fig. 2
Full Dovetail Notch

1b. Half Dovetail

In this method the top of the notch slants upward, as in the full dovetail,while the bottom cut is square (see Fig.3,below). It has some strength of the full dovetail but is easier to construct. Often both notches are found in the same building due to the similarity of construction.

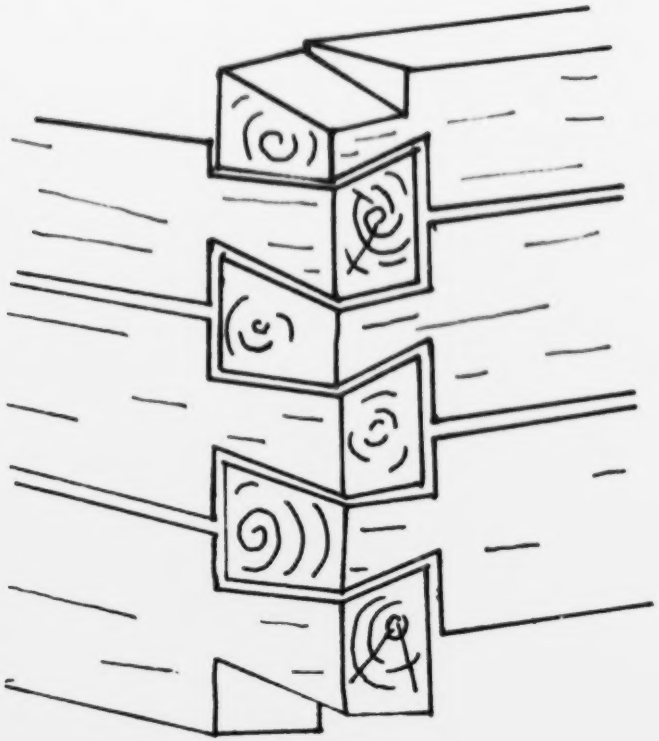


Fig. 3
Half Dovetail Notch

2. Square

The log's tongues,in this notch,are cut square, not on an angle as in the dovetail method (see Fig.4,below). Although easier to build, this type of notch does not have the interlocking strength of the dovetail. The logs must depend on the downward force of gravity to hold them in position.One means employed to offset this disadvantage was to use vertical pegs in the joints to help hold the logs in place.

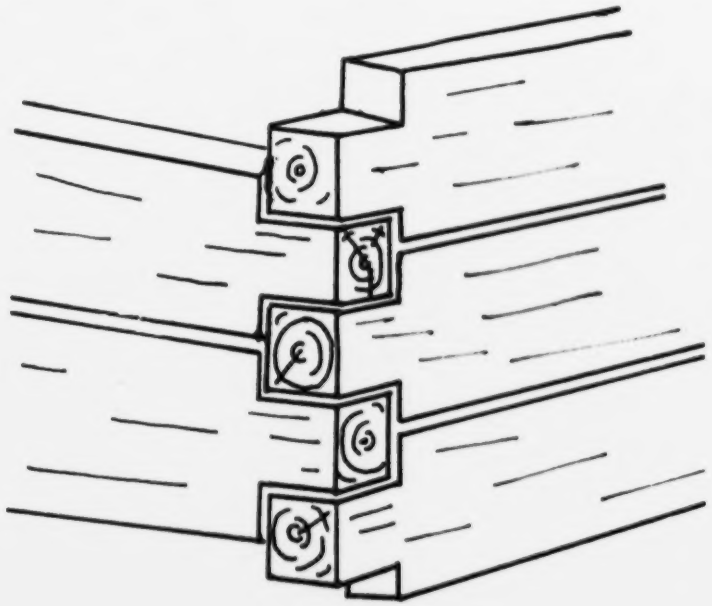


Fig. 4
Square Notch

3. Saddle or Round

In making the single saddle notch, a round cut is taken out of the top log to fit snug with the bottom log. The logs usually extend several inches beyond the joint, giving this type of corner an unmistakable appearance, the so-called "Lincoln log cabin look". A slight variation of this style is the double notch which has two round notches one on each side of the log (see Fig.5).

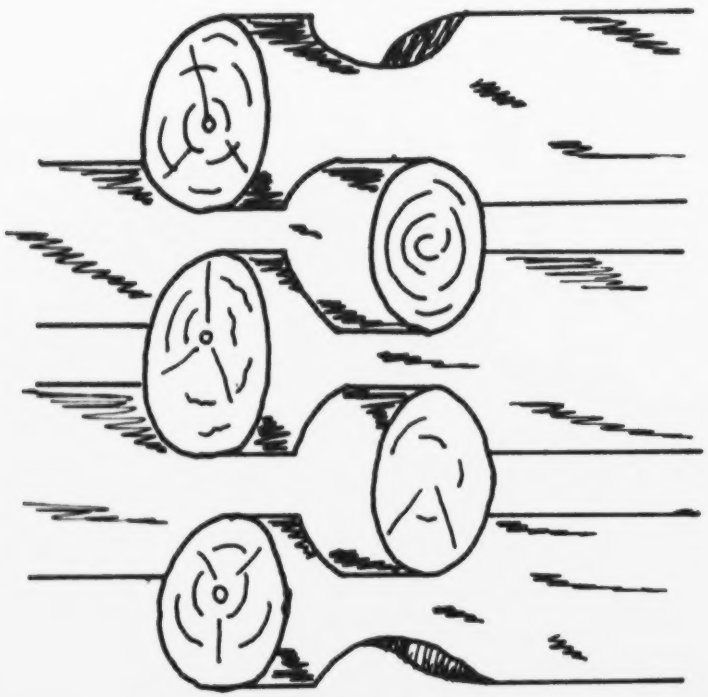


Fig. 5
Saddle or Round Notch

4. V - Notch

The V - notch seems to be a modification of the saddle notch. Instead of being round, the notch is cut in a V -shape into which the log fits (see Fig.6, below). The gable-like appearance of this corner gives it the name "roof topping". A variant of this type is the diamond notch where both the top and bottom sides of the log are V - cut to produce a diamond shape.

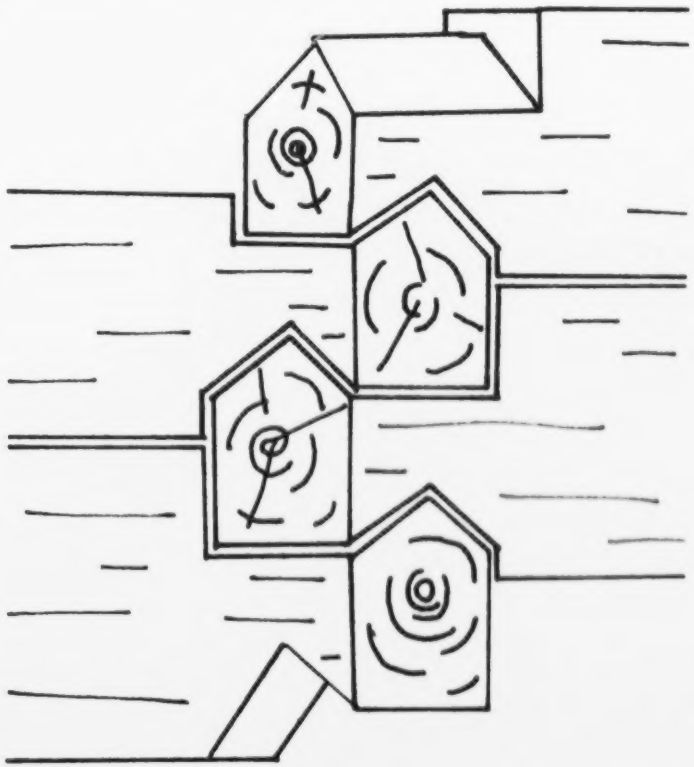


Fig. 6
V - Notch

B. Variations in Corner Notching

What explains this variation in notching? Why did such differences exist? A number of hypotheses have been put forth to answer these questions. One such hypothesis attempts to associate the type of notching with the size of available logs; another to the time of construction. The most frequently cited hypothesis is rooted in the ethnic background of the builders. Our pioneer immigrants from different countries or regions of Europe brought with them different ways of notching log buildings. In particular, it is thought that the dovetail notch can be attributed to a Scandinavian origin.[11] There is some support for this hypothesis. In a study of log cabins in Portage County, Wisconsin, Brandt and Braatz found that the geographical occurrence of dovetail notching matched that of Scandinavian settlement.[12] However, there are other studies which show that German settlers in Pennsylvania and throughout the Midwest also made the dovetail notch, as well as the V - notch and square varieties.[13] Although corner notching style could be a distinctive national or cultural trait, no definitive study has been done to prove this for all cases.

C. Corner Notching and Hewning

There appears to be a relationship between some types of notching and the use of either round or hewn logs, i.e., logs where one or more sides have been shaped square or flat with a broad axe. To accomodate the saddle notch, logs had to be kept round or un-hewn, with the bark either left on or trimmed off (see Fig. 7, p. 11).

The square notch could also be accompanied

[11] The Log Cabin Myth.

[12] Brandt, Lawrence R. and Braatz, Ned. E. "Log Buildings in Portage County, Wisconsin: Some Cultural Implications," Pioneer America, Jan. 1972, Vol. 4, No. 1. , pp. 29 - 39.

[13] Kniffen, Fred and Glassie, Henry. "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States: A Time Perspective," Geographical Review, January 1966, Vol. 56, pp. 40 - 66.

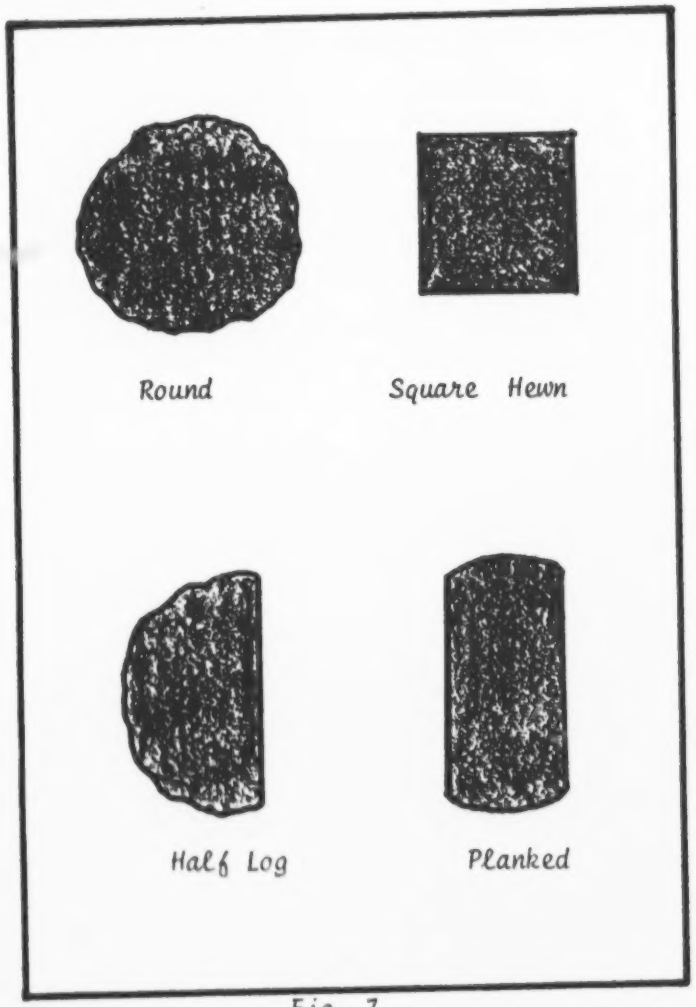


Fig. 7
Shapes of Logs

by a round log or a square hewn log or more likely a combination of both, known as the half log (see Fig. 7). This facade preserves the "real log cabin look", but also allows the inside walls to be flat, suitable for papering.

Invariably, the dovetail notch was accompanied by some form of hewn log,usually square. The association of this style of log with this notch would seem to be related to the skill of the builder. If he possessed the ability to cut a dovetail notch,certainly the skill was there to hewn a log with a broad axe. Besides, a round or un-hewn log would have looked very much out of place with the dovetail notch. In addition, other advantages were gained by hewning logs, such as ease of handling and a more weather-tight building.

IV LOG BUILDING SURVEY

A search was undertaken around our home area of St.Peter to locate,photograph and measure pioneer log buildings. In all, we found twenty structures. The Key to the Map (see Fig. 8, Location of Log Buildings) describes the general location and specific Township and Range notation of each building. The survey recorded the primary features of the structures,such as type of notching,log shape and dimensions. The name given to the building is usually that of its present owner. If this is unknown, it takes the name of the town or place in which it is located. Due to time constraints, we were unable to photograph and measure four buildings. We have nonetheless included them on the map (I.D.Numbers,15,16,17 and 18) and identified their location on the key.

A. Key to the Map

Location of Log Buildings

I.D.Number	Name	Location
1	Traverse des Sioux Cabin	Traverse des Sioux Wayside Park,one mile north of St. Peter,NW¼,NE¼,Sec.9,T 110 N,R 26 W.
2	Douglas Cabin	four miles south of St. Peter,Highway 169, NW¼,NW¼,Sec.6,T 109 N, R 26 W. Moved for restoration, Oct.,1979.
3	Museum Cabin	LeSueur County Historical Museum,Elysian,Minnesota.
4	Museum Crib	LeSueur County Historical Museum, Elysian,Minnesota.
5	Heyer's Cabin	Two miles east and three miles north of Horseshoe Lake,Rice Co. NW¼,NW¼, Sec.33, T 109 N,R 22 W.
6	Washa Cabin	Approximately five miles east of LeCenter,Highway 99. SW¼, SW¼, Sec. 30, T 111 N, R 23 W.
7	Phillips Cabin	Approximately five miles north of St.Peter,Highway 169. NE¼, SW¼, Sec. 21, T 110 N, r 26 W.
8	Krueger Barn	One mile north of Highway 14 on LeSueur County Road 48. NE¼,SW¼, Sec. 14, T 108 N, R 25 W.

Key to the Map (cond.)

I.D.Number	Name	Location
9	Jacobson Cabin	Approximately three miles west of St.Peter (take Jefferson St. west), NE¼, NW¼, Sec. 27, T 109 N, R 27 W.
10	Scandia Grove Lutheran Church	Norseland, Minnesota.
11	Ott Cabin	Sibley Park, Mankato, Minnesota.
12	Fadas Cabin	Three miles south of downtown Mankato on Blue Earth County Road 16. SW¼, SW¼, Sec. 30, T 108 N, R 26 W.
13	Garberg Cabin	Approximately six miles south of Mankato on Highway 66, then one mile east. SE¼, NW¼, Sec. 1, T 107 N, R 27 W.
14	Garberg Barn	Approximately six miles south of Mankato on Highway 66, then one mile east. SE¼, NW¼, Sec. 1, T 107 N, R 27 W.
15	de Santiago Cabin	Approximately six miles south of Mankato on Highway 66. SW¼, SW¼, Sec. 35, T 107 N, R 27 W.
16	LeSueur River Barn	Approximately seven miles south of Mankato on Highway 66, then one mile east. NE¼, NE¼, Sec. 11, T 107 N, R 27 W.
17	Alley Cabin	St.Peter (concealed in a barn).
18	Phillips Barn	Two and three fourths miles east and one mile north of Ottawa, Minnesota. SW¼, SW¼, Sec.19, T 111 N, R 25 W.
19	Borgeson Cabin	Approximately two miles north of Norseland on Nicollet County Road 3. SE¼, NW¼, Sec. 7. T 111 N, R 27 W.
20	Johnson Cabin	Approximately three miles north of Norseland on Nicollet County Road 3. SE¼, SE¼, Sec. 6, T 111 N, R 27 W.

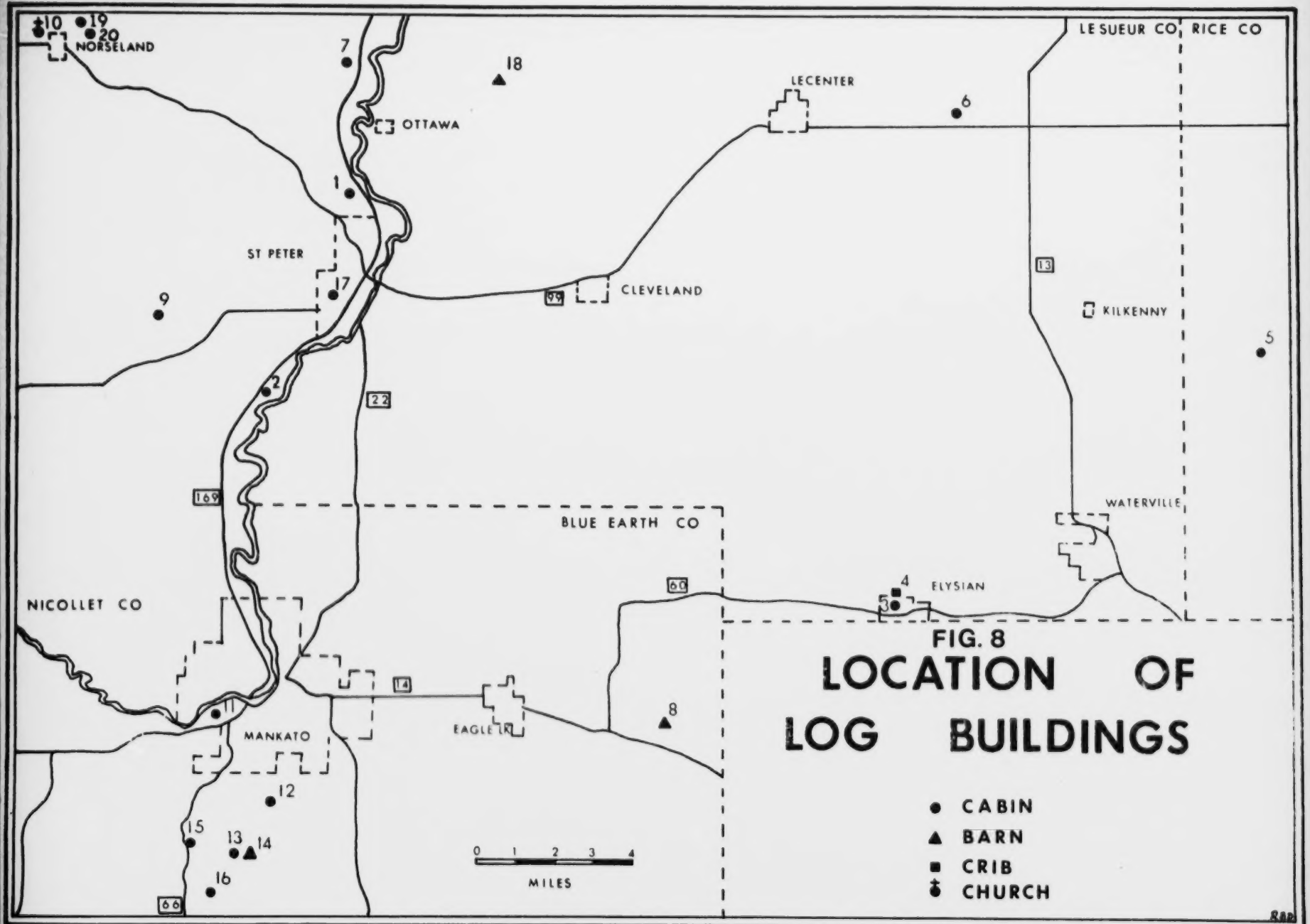


FIG. 8

LOCATION OF LOG BUILDINGS

NAME: Traverse des Sioux Cabin (Fig.9a and b)

MAP I. D. NUMBER: 1

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 18 ft. 3 in.
WIDTH : 14 ft.
HEIGHT: 14 ft. 6 in.

CONDITION: Restored

Fig. 9a

Fig. 9b

NAME: Douglas Cabin (Fig. 10)

MAP I. D. NUMBER: 2

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 14 ft.
WIDTH : 10 ft.
HEIGHT: 11 ft.

CONDITION: Original, some decayed logs; Disassembled for restoration, Oct., 1979

Fig. 10

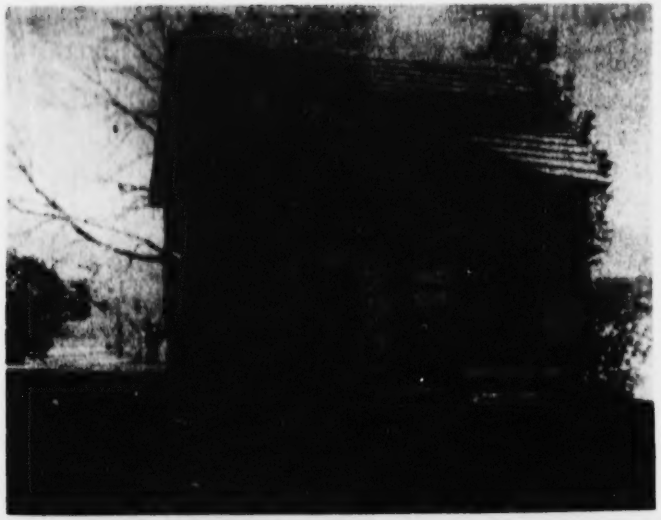


Fig. 11

NAME: Museum Cabin (Fig. 11)

MAP I. D. NUMBER: 3

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

Number of Rooms: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 20 ft. 9 in.
WIDTH: 16 ft. 5 in.
HEIGHT: 17 ft.

CONDITION: Restored

NAME: Museum Crib (Fig. 12a and b)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 4

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Saddle

LOG SHAPE: Round, extended beyond corner

NUMBER OF ROOMS: -----

SIZE - LENGTH: 18 ft.
WIDTH : 7 ft.
HEIGHT: 8 ft. 6 in.

CONDTION: Good

Fig. 12a

Fig. 12b

NAME: Heyer's Cabin (Fig. 13a and b)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 5

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Square

LOG SHAPE: Half log

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 20 ft.
WIDTH : 10 ft.
HEIGHT: 15 ft.

CONDITION: Excellent

Fig. 13a

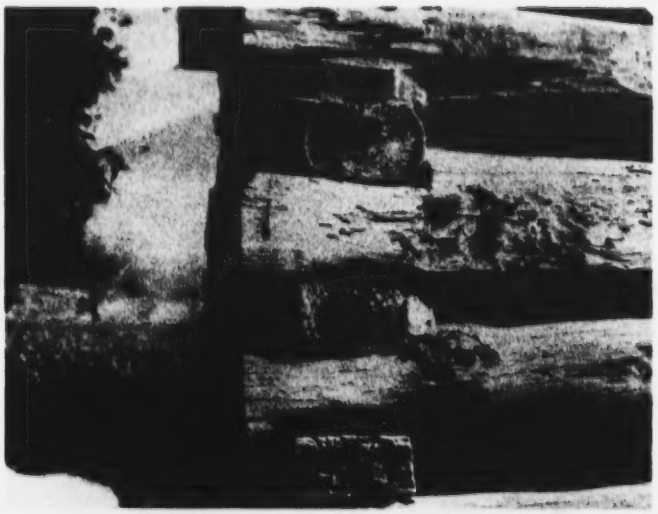


Fig. 13b

NAME: Washa Cabin (Fig. 14)

MAP I.D.NUMBER: 6

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: two story, two rooms down, two up

SIZE - LENGTH: 24 ft.
WIDTH : 20 ft.
HEIGHT: 22 ft.

CONDITION: Original, some decayed logs, partially framed. Large logs, some 22 in. wide.

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

NAME: Phillips Cabin (Fig. 15)

MAP I.D.NUMBER: 7

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Square ?

LOG SHAPE: Planked

NUMBER OF ROOMS: two story, two rooms down, one up

SIZE - LENGTH: 25 ft.
WIDTH : 18 ft. 6 in.
HEIGHT: 14 ft.

CONDITION: Original, frame siding. Excellent for restoration.

NAME: Krueger Barn (Fig. 16)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 8

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Square

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: -----

SIZE - LENGTH: 22 ft.
WIDTH : 17 ft.
HEIGHT: 16 ft.

CONDITION: Original, tin roof, some decayed logs.

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

NAME: Jacobson Cabin (Fig. 17)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 9

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Square

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn, extended beyond corner

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one

SIZE - LENGTH: 16 ft.
WIDTH : 15 ft.
HEIGHT: 12 ft.

CONDITION: Restored

NAME: Scandia Grove Lutheran Church (Fig. 18)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 10

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

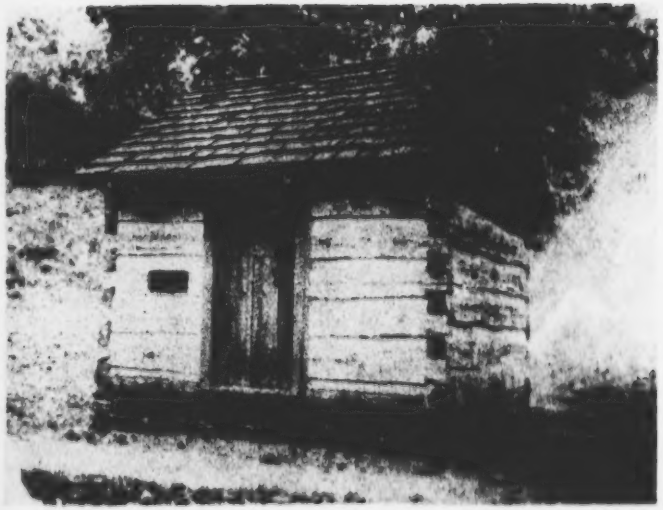
LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 21 ft. 6 in.
WIDTH : 6 ft. 4 in.
HEIGHT: 14 ft.

CONDITION: Restored, excellent condition, three sides framed.

Fig. 18



41 Fig. 19

NAME: Ott Cabin (Fig. 19)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 11

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Half Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 12 ft. 4 in.
WIDTH : 11 ft. 9 in.
HEIGHT: 11 ft. 5 in.

CONDITION: Restored

NAME: Fadas Cabin (Fig. 20a and b)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 12

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Square

LOG SHAPE: Half Log

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 14 ft.
WIDTH : 12 ft. 9 in.
HEIGHT: 13 ft. 6 in.

CONDITION: Original, decayed logs

Fig. 20a

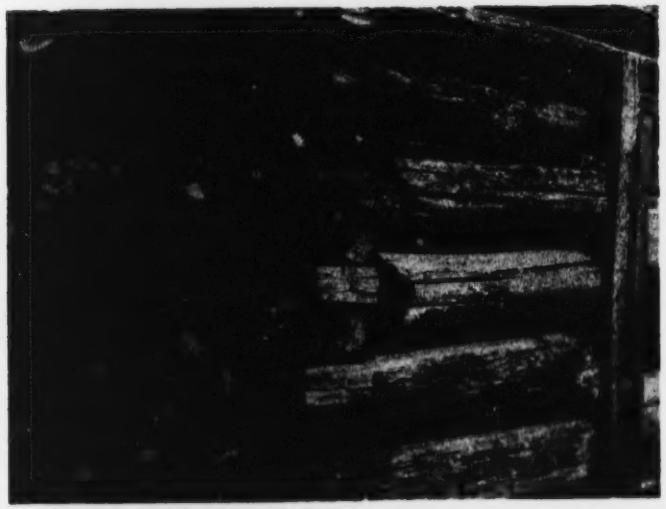


Fig. 20b

NAME: Garberg Cabin (fig. 21)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 13

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: one, plus loft

SIZE - LENGTH: 19 ft.
WIDTH : 16 ft.
HEIGHT: 13 ft.

CONDITION: Original, excellent

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

NAME: Garberg Barn (Fig. 22)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 14

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: -----

SIZE - LENGTH: 20 ft.
WIDTH : 16 ft.
HEIGHT: 14 ft.

CONDITION: Original, one side wall intact, three walls collapsed, decayed logs.

NAME: Borgeson Cabin (Fig. 23)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 19

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: two story, two rooms up and down

SIZE - LENGTH: 25 ft.
WIDTH : 15 ft.
HEIGHT: 20 ft.

CONDITION: Original, frame siding, logs in very good condition. Original cellar.

Fig. 23

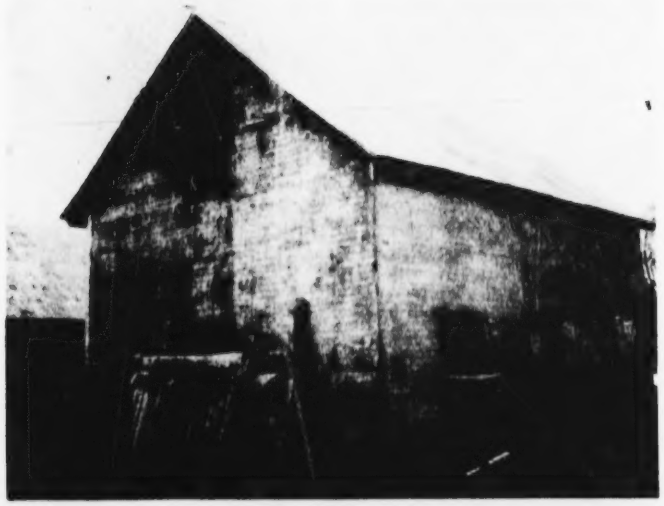


Fig. 24

NAME: Johnson Cabin (Fig. 24)

MAP I.D. NUMBER: 20

TYPE OF NOTCHING: Full Dovetail

LOG SHAPE: Square Hewn

NUMBER OF ROOMS: two story, two rooms up and down

SIZE - LENGTH: 25 ft.
WIDTH : 16 ft. 4 in.
HEIGHT: 20 ft.

CONDITION: Original, metal siding, logs in good condition.

B. Survey Summary

In our local survey, ten of the sixteen buildings examined in detail had dovetail notching with the logs hewn square. It was the most popular form of notching and hewning in the area based on our sample. In all cases but one, the full dovetail method was used;the other had a majority of half dovetail notches. We found some association with the dovetail notch and the Scandinavian origin of the builder.The best example is found around Nor seland,Minnesota.The Swedish settlers, Andrew Thorson, whose cabin became the Scandia Grove Lutheran Church, Borgeson, and John Adrian Johnson, all built houses with dovetail corners.The cabin restored at Traverse des Sioux Roadside Park north of St.Peter and the barn located on the Garberg (formerly Telou) farm south of Mankato are also of Scandinavian make and dovetailed.

There are exceptions,however. The Ott cabin, restored in Sibley Park, Mankato, is probably of German origin and has full dovetail notching. The Jacobson cabin located about three and one-half miles west of St.Peter,although made by a Swedish builder from the province of Småland, has sqaure notches.Three other cabins and one barn were also found to have square notching.

The Heyer's and Fadas cabins were constructed with the half log technique and only the Phillips cabin had planked logs.One building was saddle notched accompanied by round logs - the crib in Elysian.Thus far, we have not been able to learn of the origin of the builders of these structures.

Lastly, our survey indicates that the pioneer cabins were small in size,averaging about twenty feet in length,fifteen feet in width, and approximately fifteen feet in height. Eight had one room,generally with a loft over half the building.The two story structures were generally symmetrical,with two rooms down and two rooms up.

V CONCLUDING REMARKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although a part of the past is still with us in these log buildings, it is a vanishing past. Many have been destroyed by fire, both natural and man-made. Others have been bulldozed into rubble piles; while still others have ended up as fireplace mantels or ceiling beams. We are thankful, therefore, to the following people who provided us information on the whereabouts of those log buildings we did find:

Carl Borgeson, retired farmer, St. Peter

Bert Burns, professor of geography,
Mankato State University

Jim Hruska, retired postal worker, Waterville

John Phillips, saw mill worker, St. Peter

Thor Olmanson, student, Gustavus Adolphus College

Art Schuck, storekeeper, North Star, Minnesota

Our survey did not record all the pioneer log buildings in the area. Certainly others are out there waiting to be discovered. For example, some have been carefully hidden for years inside old frame farm houses. We, thus, send out a plea. If you know the whereabouts of a pioneer log building please write us. We will be delighted to add it to our list. If we don't inventory these buildings now, it soon will be too late. The rest will be gone and so too their testimony to the people who built them.

A final word of appreciation is expressed to the Geography Department at Gustavus Adolphus College for use of their cartographic facilities and reproduction help, to Cindy Meyer for her fine off-set work, and to Judy Douglas for her editorial skills. Any errors, however, are the responsibility of the authors.

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